

6. INTRODUCTION: THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

000 alistically estimated at about one person to six and a half square miles, and for the best watered sections as about three persons to every ten square miles.⁹ Some detailed corroboration for this last figure is supplied by the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands who are dealt with at length in this monograph. The Tiwi are one of the few tribes occupying a well-watered and favorable environment for hunting and gathering who have been left in continuous occupation of their native habitat down to the present day. A careful and exhaustive census of them (by Hart) in 1928-29 showed that the approximately 2900 square miles comprising the two islands were occupied and used by 1062 people.

Thus between the time of their first arrival and approximately 1770 when the white men first got to know them, the original group of primitive castaways had multiplied to a population of between 250,000 and 275,000. This relatively small number (for the size of the continent) was thinly spread over most of the land, but was more numerous in the areas where the water supply was good and where the natives had available adequate sources of meat—marsupial, reptile, and bird—and fish, as well as a considerable quantity of wild plant foods.

Basically, all Australian tribes had cultures of the same general type, although local variation had developed as the original emigrants spread out into different geographical environments and their descendants lost contact with each other. The question of how many tribes there were at the beginning of white settlement is almost impossible to answer since "tribe" in Australia meant little more than a group of bands with a distinct language. There were at least five hundred distinct languages (all belonging to the same linguistic family, but most of them mutually unintelligible) which in the total population of a quarter of a million gives an average of about five hundred speakers for each distinct linguistic group. This seems a low figure for a so-called tribe and is probably brought about by the large number of very small linguistic units ("tribes") which early writers report in some areas such as coastal New South Wales and parts of Victoria. Certainly the linguistic units ("tribes") which survived down to modern times and could therefore be studied by twentieth-century anthropologists, such as the Arunta, Murngin, and Tiwi tribes, were considerably larger than five hundred people, but probably even the biggest "tribes" did not exceed two thousand in population.

Scattered in small local groups (bands) over enormous areas of country and armed only with boomerangs, crude stone-pointed spears, and spear throwers, the Australian natives were in no position to resist the white settlers. They were simply brushed aside by the early British colonists¹⁰ who began arriving in 1788, and in the course of the next century and a half, the natives

⁹ Radcliffe-Brown 1930.

¹⁰ There is an interesting link between American history and the first white settlement in Australia. Prior to the Revolutionary War, Great Britain deported her worst criminals to convict settlements in the colony of Georgia. After American independence, she had to find a new dumping ground to relieve the overcrowding in the British jails and established her new convict settlement at Botany Bay near the present city of Sydney on the east coast of Australia.

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months after the attack on Darwin. Many of the older Tiwi who were in Darwin during the bombing did not survive the war; the psychological strain and lack of sufficient food was too much for them. Genesologies show that an unusual number of deaths occurred among Tiwi between 1942 and 1946. 648 [165]

When Western food supplies again became available, the old Tiwi bush living seems to have departed. The Tiwi suddenly realized their full dependence upon the products which only the whites could provide. As the war came to an end and one after another of the temporary military bases were abandoned, the missionaries and the Tiwi salvaged what they could, transporting large amounts of corrugated iron to Bathurst Island Mission for native huts. The Tiwi were drawn together around the Mission in larger numbers than ever before, their camps ranging in a line along the Mission beach. The majority of the Tiwi, about 600, considered Bathurst Island Mission their home, although some of the young adult males spent most of the year in Darwin. About 90 islanders lived adjacent to the half-caste Melville Island Mission at Garden Point. Another 150 were permanently located at the government settlement at Snake Bay. The remaining Tiwi, about 150, were year-round residents of Darwin; over one hundred lived at Bagot Native Compound and at an unsupervised native camp at Point Gunn directly opposite the southernmost tip of Melville Island; the rest were inmates at the leper colony. The resulting total population of about 950, in 1954, is only about a hundred less than the figure of 1062 which Hart obtained in his census of 1928-29. 177 361 797 162 [161]

Marriage Arrangements

We have discussed how, under the traditional Tiwi pattern of life, the greatest energies of mature males were expended in bargaining with each other for new wives. The old social system was one which had as normal features prenatal and early childhood engagements for females, remarriage for all widows, considerable age difference between marriage partners, and polygamy. The new Catholic system introduced by Father Gsell outlawed, or at least discouraged, polygamous marriages, nuptial unions between persons of greatly differing ages, and all prenatal or childhood betrothals. As indicated, Father Gsell initiated his new policies by purchasing young females and then allowing them to choose their own partners from among their single agemates. 177 797 58

It is of interest to inspect the actual circumstances surrounding one of the earliest unions which took place under Father Gsell's supervision. About 1914, Polly, an attractive young female who had already had a rather checkered career, having been stolen by a Yuwatja male from her rightful mate, was "stolen back" by another Tiwi, Timalarus of the Rangwila. Polly, however, decided that she did not want an old husband like Timalarus, so she ran away to the sisters and Father Gsell. In time, old Timalarus allowed Father Gsell to buy this wife who did not want to live with him. Shortly afterward, Father Gsell asked Polly whom she wanted to marry. Polly named Cabbagee as the 159 177 584 797

THE TIWI OF MELVILLE AND BATHURST ISLANDS

not only in physique but also in intelligence. I should be surprised to find in any other Australian tribe a man with the intelligence and adaptability of my own head boy Mariano. 169 153

The flora and fauna of the two islands is very similar to that of the rest of the Northern Territory. The country is mostly flat with a low range of rocky hills between Cape Gambier and Cape Keith on Melville Island, and a still lower range in the centre of Bathurst. The timber consists of the usual Australian trees; gums, stringy-bark, woolly-butt, bloodwood and ironwood cover most of the two islands, broken here and there by patches of open grassland and in other places by dense patches of jungle where snakes and "devils" thrive and the natives seldom enter. Wallabies are extraordinarily plentiful, but there are no kangaroos. Buffaloes are found on Melville in small numbers. These are the wild descendants of the domestic Indian buffaloes imported for agricultural purposes by the early settlers at Fort Dundas. At one time they had increased and multiplied to such effect that thousands were shot every year without any appreciable effect upon their numbers. At the present time, however, probably owing to many of the cows being killed, there are probably not more than a thousand on the island. The natives are seldom able to kill a buffalo though they realise the fact that it is good to eat. 133 37 136

Not only are wallabies plentiful, but there is also an abundant supply of the other native articles of food, fish, crocodile, birds of all kinds, wild honey, yams and other native vegetables. As a result of this abundance of foods, it would seem that the two islands had a greater density of population than is to be found in almost any other part of Australia. 262 161

LOCAL ORGANIZATION

The people inhabiting Melville and Bathurst Islands are subdivided into a number of local groups. These local groups are the important sections of the population since they act as land-owning groups, war-making groups, have a solidarity of their own which is far stronger than any tribal solidarity that may exist and even to some extent regulate marriage. 621

Before considering these hordes in detail, however, something must be said about the tribal name. All the hordes practise the same customs, speak the same language and inter-marry. The boundaries of the people speaking this language are of course strictly defined by the sea. In other words, the people of Melville and Bathurst have a solidarity of their own, 184 619

PERSONAL NAMES AMONG THE TIWI

relatives of the mother, such as the mother's mother's brother. The Tiwi have matrilineal totemic clans.

Names are seldom bestowed upon an individual by women; the only female relative having that power is the actual mother's mother. A mother is never in any circumstances allowed to name her own child. The reason for this is fairly obvious. The naming of children is a ritual affair, and as such is more or less forbidden to the women, for although their exclusion is not nearly so strict as in some other parts of Australia, they do not, among the Tiwi, take very much part in ritual affairs. The mother's mother, however, stands in a rather privileged position to her daughter's child. She is of the same totem and is normally a very old woman, and to a certain extent appears to become a symbol of the clan for her daughter's son. A boy, for example, will strongly resent and often endeavour to revenge any insult to his mother's mother, even if it means taking up arms against his own father. For example, during my stay a boy of twelve abused his father and quitted his father's camp for over a month because in a fight between hordes his father had injured the boy's mother's mother's brother. There was no particular respect or regard for the latter individual on the part of the boy, but the injury was a grave insult to his mother's mother.

It must also be understood that it is impossible for any two people to have the same name. Should a father inadvertently bestow upon his child a name already in use he is guilty of a gross breach of etiquette, and to prevent such a possibility a man will refrain for a long time from coining a name until he is fairly certain that the one he decides upon is neither already in use nor was held by any person recently dead. Although the Tiwi number nearly eleven hundred people at the present time, and each one of these has on an average three names, a careful study of these three thousand three hundred names fails to reveal any two as being identical.

By the time that a child reaches puberty he is the possessor of several names since by then some at least of the people entitled to bestow names upon him will have exercised that privilege. In exceptional cases he may have six or seven names though sometimes only one. All of these will have been known at some time or other to the tribe at large, though it is usually possible to get a full list of a person's names only from that individual himself or his father or mother.

It is not at all unusual in primitive societies for the death of a man to

NOTES ON THE NATIVES OF BATHURST ISLAND, NORTH AUSTRALIA.

BY HERBERT BASEDOW, M.D., M.A., B.Sc., F.G.S., etc.

WITH PLATES VII-XX.

Local Correspondent of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, and Honorary 000
Fellow of the Anthropological Society, Göttingen; late Chief Medical Inspector
and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory of Australia.

INTRODUCTION.

In August of last year (1911), I visited Bathurst Island to inspect the natives on 121
behalf of the Commonwealth Government. Accompanied by one of my inspectors
(Mr. J. H. Kelly) and a crew consisting of a Chinaman, a Manilaman, and three
natives of the Larrekiya Tribe,¹ I left Port Darwin at eleven o'clock in the
evening and entered Apsley Strait early the next morning. We spent nine days in
the examination of the island, entering the numerous salt-water arms and rivers,
effecting a landing wherever possible and traversing the island on foot. Landing [137]
was, in most places, difficult on account of the thick growth of mangroves that
fringes the island on the east. It had been my intention to circumnavigate the
island, but a heavy monsoonal gale prevented us from even making the attempt in
the small motor-craft at our disposal. I therefore decided to return *via* Apsley
Strait and inspect part of Melville Island.

The plates included in this paper are all reproductions of my original
photographs and coloured drawings.

Condition of Natives.

I estimate the population of the island to be about 500. Their isolation and, [161]
no doubt in a measure also, their reputation as being cannibalistic and treacherous [177]
in their habits, have guarded their primitive condition to the present day.² Before 648

¹ *Vide Tracts. Roy. Soc. of S. Australia*, vol. xxxi, 1907, p. 1.

² Compare the statement:—

"Melville Island, about 30 miles north of Port Darwin, is inhabited by a tribe of which 304
very little is known. They do not circumcize, and speak a different language from those on the 197
mainland. They are represented as a very strong and powerful race.

"Before the arrival of the Hon. B. T. Finnis at Escape Cliffs in 1864, the Melville Island 648
natives occasionally visited the mainland for the purpose of stealing lubras, in which they
invariably succeeded; but they have not done so since. This tribe is of a very hostile nature,
and on several occasions have attacked Europeans visiting the island. Their canoes and
weapons are similar to those on the mainland." P. Foelsche: "Notes on the Aborigines of [171]
North Australia," *Trans. Roy. Soc. S. Australia*, vol. v, 1882, p. 17.

Tiwi invoke the power of a yam

By JANE C. GOODALE

824 IN 1912 SIR BALDWIN SPENCER, a professor of biology at
 [114] the University of Melbourne, visited Melville Island, in
 [124] the Timor Sea. There he observed a Tiwi tribal ceremony in
 [114] which a number of young boys and girls participated in the
 [198] ritual preparation of a species of yam the Tiwi called
Kulama. Spencer wrote of this ceremony, "initiation of
 young men [and women] on Melville Island is intimately
 associated with what is known as a yam ceremony." This
 statement is particularly noteworthy, for, in 1954, when I
 visited the Tiwi for the first time and witnessed the annual
Kulama ceremony, no initiates took part. The ceremony,
 however, was still being performed with no significant
 changes in the complex ritual procedures that Spencer had
 described more than forty years before.

That the *Kulama* ceremony can and does take place with-
 out initiates does not mean that Spencer was wrong to con-
 sider it an important part of initiation into adult life. It
 does mean that many of the new generation of Tiwi believe
 [197] that such participation cannot prepare them adequately
 for a way of life that has been radically changed by contact
 with Western culture during the past fifty years.

● 161 In order to understand what this ceremony means to
 131 those who still perform it, one must first understand what
 178 the Tiwi consider to be adulthood. The Tiwi, now about a
 thousand in number, have lived for untold centuries on Mel-
 ville and Bathurst Islands, which are situated thirty miles
 north of Darwin, the capital city of Australia's Northern
 Territory. The islands and surrounding waters are well
 supplied with food, and fresh water is plentiful. Eco-
 nomically and technically the Tiwi have been remarkably
 conservative. They came to the islands as hunters and gath-
 erers of wild food, using crude chipped stone axes, dig-
 ging sticks, simple wooden spears, and hunting dogs, and
 found that little else was needed to exploit the natural re-
 sources and to provide themselves with a stable, varied,
 [224] and adequate diet. With the exception of the wallaby, the
 land animals of the two islands were small and nocturnal
 and could simply be collected during the day with little
 825 physical effort or skill. The few skills that were necessary
 462 were identifying tracks to find game and chopping out or
 868 digging up the sleeping animals. Young boys and girls were
 taught these techniques, since there was no essential sexual
 division of labor in food-collecting. Boys, however, re-

000 TIWI NATIVE on Melville Island expresses a grievance in an
 original song during the annual three-day *Kulama* ceremony.

[P. 11 (B)]

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Fig. 1. Snake Bay Settlement

114 Islanders on a hunt. The trip took us to a small clearing on the right bank of the Paluwiunga River, ten miles upstream from where it empties into the Arafura Sea.

131 A brief glance at the map will help to further pinpoint this location. Ten degrees south of the equator and at a distance of twenty to fifty miles due north from the Australian Northern Territory capital of Darwin, lies the relatively large Melville Island (1,000 square miles), named for Viscount Henry Dundas Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, who authorized the coastal survey of 1818 during which the island was circumnavigated. To the west, separated by a narrow strait, lies the smaller Bathurst Island. The group of people with whom I found myself camped by the river bank were members of the Tiwi, a tribe of Australian Aborigines whose country includes both these islands. Today about seven hundred members of the tribe live near to the southeast corner of Bathurst Island where they are in various ways administered to by the Sacred Heart Mission. On the northern coast of Melville Island, on a hill overlooking Snake Bay, near the mouth of the

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Tjipripu River, stands the Snake Bay Native Settlement where about 180-200 natives live along with two or three white employees of the Department of Welfare of the Australian Government and their families.

It was not always like this. Formerly there were no white men and the tribe lived scattered throughout the entire countryside. The land was divided into "countries," each owned by a division of the tribe, and providing the owners with all necessary food, clothing, and shelter. Although many changes have come to the tribe in the last fifty years through contact with the early buffalo shooters, the missionaries, and the government, the individual Tiwi is, with few exceptions, a hunter at heart. He may have acquired new skills such as a knowledge of English, and the ability to work at cutting lumber in the sawmill or driving a truck, but in doing so he has not lost the skill to track down the wallabies or possums in the bush or fish in the sea, nor has he lost the desire to do so. There are, of course, exceptions—those who prefer working in the settlement or in Darwin and attempt to make their own way into the white man's world. A few are successful and never return; others, not so successful, try it for a while and return to alternate between doing their bit in the settlement and going on "vacation" into the bush when they feel the need of a change of pace.

By the end of October I too felt the need of a change of scene. I had been living at the settlement or close to it for seven months. I had watched the Tiwi as they built the settlement buildings, started formal schooling and helped run the everyday affairs of a community of two hundred souls. I had watched them in the evenings when they often performed portions of their lengthy ceremonies necessary to the proper burial of a fellow tribal member. I had accompanied them on weekends whenever they had camped in the surrounding countryside, and had gathered and consumed the tasty native food as a variation to corned beef, vegetables, flour, tea, and sugar of the settlement menu. But after seven months I too grew tired of corned beef, and as the daily increasing humidity announced the approach of the wet season I was anxious to go hunting once more before travel became difficult. Another sign of the approaching change of seasons, observed with great interest by the natives,